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JOHN WOOLMAN'S EFFORTS IN BEHALF OF FREEDOM

Pioneers of epoch-making reforms are seldom accorded the reward they merit. Later apostles usually obscure the greatness of their predecessors, and posterity is prone to overlook the pristine achievements of those who first had the vision. Such is the case of John Woolman, a poor, untutored shopkeeper of New Jersey. He was among the foremost to visualize the wrongs of human slavery, but his real significance as an abolitionist has been greatly dimmed by the subsequent deeds of such apostles as Garrison, Phillips, and Lincoln.

John Woolman's career as an apostle of freedom dates from his first appearance in the ministry of the Society of Friends, an organization commonly known as the Quakers, founded by George Fox in England during the middle of the seventeenth century. Shortly after the organization of this society, many of the members migrated to New England and the Middle Atlantic Colonies. Others were exiled by Charles II to the West Indies.¹ Paradoxical as it may seem, these earliest Friends, though distinguishing themselves from other Christian sects by their special stress on immediate teaching and guidance of the Holy Spirit, had no scruples against keeping slaves. As a matter of fact, there was a prevalent conviction that Christianity indorsed slavery.²

This anomalous indifference to the enslaved Negro's condition remained almost constant until 1742. A few sporadic attempts, to be sure, were made to discountenance

¹ The Act of Banishment enforced by Charles II against all dissenters.

² This opinion was held and supported by Richard Nisbit, in his "Slavery Not Forbidden by Scripture, or a Defence of the West-India Planters." See "Slave-Trade Tracts," Vol. 1, Tract 3. The same opinion was given by John Millar, LL.D., of the University of Glasgow, in his treatise on the "Ranks of Society."

slavery, but popular opinion, incited by greed, favored the institution. In 1671, for example, George Fox, during his visit to Barbadoes, admonished slaveholders to train their slaves in the fear of God; and further admonished the overseers "to deal gently and mildly with their Negroes, and not use cruelty towards them as the manner of some hath been and is, and after certain years of servitude make them free."³ Four years later, William Edmundson complained against the unjust treatment of slaves, but was brought, for his pains, before the Governor, on the charge of "endeavoring to excite an insurrection among the blacks."⁴ In 1688 the German Quakers of Germantown, Pennsylvania, sent to the Yearly Meeting for the Pennsylvania and New Jersey Colonies a protest against "the buying and keeping of Negroes."⁵ The matter was taken under advisement, but not until eight years later did the Yearly Meeting advise against "bringing in any more Negroes." The Chester Quarterly Meeting, however, insisted upon the adoption of definite measures against slave traffic, but the Society never manifested any enthusiasm for such legislation. The Friends were themselves slaveholders, and slaveholders were rapidly increasing their wealth and power through slavery; so they felt no pressing need of reform. The Yearly Meetings, therefore, like many modern congresses, dextrously dodged the grave issue of Negroes' rights, and merely expressed an opinion meekly opposed to the importation of the blacks, and a desire that "Friends generally do, as much as may be, avoid buying such Negroes as shall hereafter be brought in, rather than offend any Friends who are against it; yet this is only caution and not censure."⁶ Not until 1742 was any appreciable influence exerted on the Friends against slavery. A storekeeper of Mount Holly, New Jersey, requested his clerk to prepare a bill of sale of a Negro woman whom he had sold. The thought of writing

³ Whittier, "The Journal of John Woolman," 7.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁵ *Pa. Mag.*, IV, 28.

⁶ Whittier, "The Journal of John Woolman," 8-9.

such an instrument greatly oppressed the clerk. He complied, however, but afterwards told both the employer and the customer that he considered slave-keeping inconsistent with the Christian religion.⁷ The clerk who ventured such an opinion was John Woolman.

John Woolman was born in Northampton, in Burlington County, West Jersey, in the year 1720. His youthful struggle against wickedness was in many respects similar to Bunyan's. The fear of God seized him in early boyhood, and an intense religious fervor characterized his future career. Though this fervor was undoubtedly an innate tendency, it owed its development partly to the early guidance of pious parents; for Woolman's father was, without doubt, a devout Christian. Every Sunday after meeting, the children were required to read the Holy Scriptures or some religious books. Here, no doubt, was the beginning of Woolman's religious devotion to the teachings of the Bible.⁸ At times, during his youth, he apparently forgot these earliest teachings, but he never wandered too far to be reproved by his conscience. When he reached the age of

⁷ Woolman relates this experience in the first chapter of his "Journal," as follows: "My employer, having a Negro woman, sold her, and desired me to write a bill of sale, the man being waiting who bought her. The thing was sudden; and though I felt uneasiness at the thoughts of writing an instrument of slavery for one of my fellow creatures, yet I remembered that I was hired by the year, that it was my master who directed me to do it, and that it was an elderly man, a member of our Society, who bought her; so through weakness I gave way and wrote it; but at the executing of it I was so afflicted in mind, that I said before my master and the Friend that I believed slave-keeping to be a practice inconsistent with the Christian religion. This, in some degree, abated my uneasiness; yet as often as I reflected seriously upon it I thought I should have been clearer if I had desired to be excused from it, as a thing against my conscience; for such it was." "Journal of John Woolman," Edition Philadelphia, 1845, pp. 30-31.

⁸ Concerning this early home training, Woolman writes: "The pious instructions of my parents were often fresh in my mind, when I happened to be among wicked children, and were of use to me. Having a large family of children, they used frequently, on first-days, after meeting, to set us one after another to read the Holy Scriptures, or some religious books, the rest sitting by without much conversation; I have since often thought it was a good practice. From what I had read and heard, I believed there had been, in past ages, people who walked in uprightness before God in a degree exceeding any that I knew or heard of now living." "Journal of John Woolman," 20.

sixteen, his will was finally subdued, and he learned the lesson that youth seldom learns,—that “all the cravings of sense must be governed by a Divine principle.” He tells us that he became convinced that “true religion consisted in an inward life, wherein the heart doth love and reverence God, the Creator, and learns to exercise true justice and goodness, not only toward all men, but also toward the brute creatures.”⁹

All this time Woolman lived with his parents and worked on the plantation. His schooling was, consequently, meagre, but he gave a generous portion of his leisure to his self-improvement. At the age of twenty-one, he left home to tend shop and keep books for a baker in Mount Holly. Meanwhile, his religious fervor was growing more intense, and with it his genuine philanthropy. The inevitable sequence of his accelerated enthusiasm for spreading the teachings of Christianity was his entrance into the Christian ministry.¹⁰

In 1746 Woolman accompanied his beloved friend, Isaac Andrews, on a tour through Maryland, Virginia, and Carolina. It was on this journey that he beheld for the first time the miseries of slavery.¹¹ He became so depressed with

⁹ “Journal of John Woolman,” 25.

¹⁰ That Woolman had a very lofty conception of his calling will appear in his following reflection: “All the faithful are not called to the public ministry; but whoever are, are called to minister of that which they have tasted and handled spiritually. The outward modes of worship are various; but whenever any are true ministers of Jesus Christ, it is from the operation of his Spirit upon their hearts, first purifying them, and thus giving them a just sense of the conditions of others. This truth was early fixed in my mind, and I was taught to watch the pure opening, and to take heed lest, while I was standing to speak, my own will should get uppermost, and cause me to utter words from worldly wisdom, and depart from the channel of the true gospel ministry.” “Journal of John Woolman,” 29.

¹¹ According to tradition, Woolman travelled mostly on foot during his journeys among slaveholders. Brissot points out the similarity between the Apostles’ practices and Woolman’s. The comparison is entertaining, but cannot on all points be reconciled with facts given by Woolman himself in his “Journal.” See Brissot’s “New Travels in America,” published in 1788.

Woolman’s impression of slavery at this time is best told in his own words referring to this first journey. He writes: “Two things were remarkable to me in this journey: first, in regard to my entertainment. When I ate, drank,

what he saw that on his return he wrote an essay on the subject, publishing it in 1754. The essay appeared under the elongated title of "Some Considerations on the Keeping of Negroes Recommended to the Professors of Christianity of Every Denomination."¹² The theme of Woolman's discussion is the Brotherhood of Man. "All men by nature," he argues, "are equally entitled to the equity of the Golden Rule, and under indispensable obligations to it."¹³ The whole discussion, which is an appeal to the Friends to be mindful of the teachings of the Bible, glows with the religious zeal which was so eminently characteristic of the author. It is replete with such Biblical references as are sure to have a wholesome effect upon a religious sect like the Society of Friends.

Woolman made a second visit in 1757 to the Southern meetings of the Society of Friends. Again he beheld the miseries of slavery and became greatly alarmed at the extension of the system. Everywhere he turned, he saw slaves. What pained him most was the presence of slaves in the homes of Friends. He declined, therefore, to accept the hospitality of his several hosts, feeling that the acceptance of such courtesies would be an indorsement or encouragement of the

and lodged free-cost with people who lived in ease on the hard labor of their slaves I felt uneasy; and as my mind was inward to the Lord, I found this uneasiness return upon me, at times, through the whole visit. Where the masters bore a good share of the burden, and lived frugally, so that their servants were well provided for, and their labor moderate, I felt more easy; but where they lived in a costly way, and laid heavy burdens on their slaves, my exercise was often great, and I frequently had conversation with them in private concerning it. Secondly, this trade of importing slaves from their native country being much encouraged amongst them, and the white people and their children so generally living without such labor, was frequently the subject of my serious thoughts. I saw in these southern provinces so many vices and corruptions, increased by this trade and this way of life, that it appeared to me as a dark gloominess hanging over the land." "Journal of John Woolman," 93.

¹² Note that this essay was not published until eight years after Woolman's journey. The publication in 1754 was due partly to the suggestion of Woolman's father, who, just before his death, persuaded his son to publish the essay. This essay may be found in "Slave-Trade Tracts," Vol. 2.

¹³ See *Some Considerations*, etc.

evil.¹⁴ Meanwhile, he held confidential talks with Friends on the subject of slavery. On one occasion, when a colonel of the militia berated the Negroes' slothful disposition, Woolman replied that free men, whose minds are properly on their business, find a satisfaction in improving, cultivating, and providing for their families; whereas Negroes, laboring to support others, and expecting nothing but slavery during life, have not the same inducement to be industrious. Again, when another slaveholder gave the wretchedness of Negroes, occasioned by intestine wars, as a justification of slave-traffic, Woolman answered that, if compassion for the Africans, on account of their domestic troubles, was the real motive of buying them, the spirit of tenderness should incite the Friends to use the Negroes kindly, as strangers brought out of affliction. Many other arguments were urged in defence of slavery, among which number was the oft-repeated notion that the Africans' color subjects them to, or qualifies them for, slavery, inasmuch as they are descendants of Cain who was marked with this color, because he slew his brother Abel.¹⁵ In short, a large portion

¹⁴ In this connection, Woolman has two striking passages on page 61 of his "Journal," viz., "Receiving a gift, considered as a gift, brings the receiver under obligations to the benefactor, and has a natural tendency to draw the obliged into a party with the giver. To prevent difficulties of this kind, and to preserve the minds of judges from any bias, was the Divine prohibition: 'Thou shalt not receive any gift; for a gift bindeth the wise, and perverteth the words of the righteous.'" (Exod. XXIII, 8.)

Again, "Conduct is more convincing than language, and where people, by their actions, manifest that the slave-trade is not so disagreeable to their principles, but that it may be encouraged, there is not a sound uniting with some Friends who visit them."

¹⁵ Woolman answered this argument by showing that Noah and his family were all who survived the flood, according to Scripture; and as Noah was of Seth's race, the family of Cain was wholly destroyed. Woolman's opponent, however, replied that after the flood Ham went to the land of Nod and took a wife; that Nod was a land far distant, inhabited by Cain's race, and that the flood did not reach it; and as Ham was sentenced to be a servant of servants to his brethren, these two families, being thus joined, were undoubtedly fit only for slaves. Woolman answered that the flood was a judgment upon the world for their abominations, and it was granted that Cain's stock was the most wicked, and therefore unreasonable to suppose that they were spared. As to Ham's going to the land of Nod for a wife, no time being fixed, Nod might be inhabited by some of Noah's family before Ham married a second time.

of Woolman's time during this second journey was given over to answering such arguments. He travelled in the two months, during which he was out, about eleven hundred and fifty miles. His efforts were not without fruit, for he made a profound impression on many of the honest-hearted.

All this time Woolman fought single-handed against overwhelming odds, but he was destined soon to have help from two of the most remarkable and antithetical personages connected with this early movement against slavery; namely, Benjamin Lay and Anthony Benezet.¹⁶ Lay represented the revolutionary type of reformer. Whittier describes his personal appearance as "a figure only four and a half feet high, hunchbacked, with projecting chest, legs small and uneven, arms longer than his legs; a huge head, showing only beneath his enormous white hat large, solemn eyes and a prominent nose; the rest of his face covered with a snowy semicircle of beard falling low on his breast—a figure to recall the old legends of troll, brownie, and kobold."¹⁷ By birth he was a Friend, but the Society in England dis-
Moreover, according to the text, "All flesh died that moved upon the earth." (Gen. VII, 21.) For the full account of the argument, see the "Journal," p. 66.

It is interesting in this connection to note how Montesquieu, in his "Spirit of Laws," treats this color argument with ridicule. He writes ironically:

"Were I to vindicate our right to make slaves of the Negroes, these should be my arguments.

"The Europeans, having extirpated the Americans, were obliged to make slaves of the Africans for clearing such vast tracts of land.

"Sugar would be too dear, if the plants which produce it were cultivated by any other than slaves.

"These creatures are all over black, and with such a flat nose that they can scarcely be pitied.

"It is hardly to be believed that God, who is a wise being, should place a soul, especially a good soul, in such a black ugly body.

"The Negroes prefer a glass necklace to that gold, which polite nations so highly value: can there be greater proof of their wanting common sense?

"It is impossible for us to suppose these creatures to be men, because, allowing them to be men, a suspicion would follow, that we ourselves are not Christians."—Book XV, Chap. V.

¹⁶ See Clarkson's "History of the Abolition of the African Slave Trade," II, 148, and Vaux's "Memoirs of Anthony Benezet."

¹⁷ See John Greenleaf Whittier's "Introduction to John Woolman's Journal."

owned him on account of his revolutionary propensities. He took up residence in the West Indies, but was compelled to leave on account of his violent denunciation of slavery. He went to Philadelphia, but finding slavery there, retired to a cave, where he lived a most eccentric life, refusing to eat food or wear clothes which had been secured at the expense of animal life, or produced by slave labor. He made frequent excursions, however, from his cave to denounce slavery, his favorite subject being "Deliverance to the Captive." He usually succeeded in being heard, though he was detested by the slaveholders. On one occasion, when he interrupted a meeting in Philadelphia, he was forcibly ejected by a burly blacksmith. He remained, however, the most fearless of the earliest abolitionists. Though his methods were entirely different from Woolman's, and though, no doubt, neither reformer was influenced by the other, Lay's stubborn fight against slavery was obviously helpful to Woolman's calmer campaign against the same evil.

Anthony Benezet, on the other hand, was a reformer of riper judgment and calmer methods than Lay. He has been described as "a small, eager-faced man, full of zeal and activity, constantly engaged in works of benevolence, which were by no means confined to the blacks."¹⁸ He was a descendant of persecuted French Protestants. He, therefore, inherited an aversion to any form of persecution, and readily became a benefactor of the slave. It was inevitable that he should become a friend of Woolman, and a coadjutor in the movement to abolish slavery.¹⁹

Whether Lay or Benezet was influenced by Woolman may be a matter of speculation and debate. The consideration of primary importance is the increasing interest manifested in abolition. The Friends were beginning to realize that slavery was contradictory to the basic principles of

¹⁸ This description is by the Marquis de Chastellux, author of "De la Felicite Publique."

¹⁹ For an exhaustive discussion of Benezet, see the "Journal of Negro History," Vol. II, No. 1.

their organization. Woolman's real opportunity, therefore, came at the memorable Yearly Meeting of 1758, in Philadelphia—the meeting which Whittier has seen fit to term “one of the most important convocations in the history of the Christian church.” All during the early part of the meeting, Woolman remained silent, his “mind frequently covered with inward prayer.” But when, towards the close of the meeting, the subject of slavery was brought up, he took such an active part in the discussion that he dominated that part of the meeting. His remarks were simple but impressive.²⁰ The effect was so immediate that many slaveholders expressed a desire to pass a rule to treat as offenders Friends who in the future bought slaves. But there arose the criticism that the real evil could hardly be cured “until a thorough search was made in the circumstances of such Friends as kept Negroes with respect to the uprightness of their motives in keeping them, that impartial justice might be administered throughout.” Sober thought prevailed. Many assented to the proposition, and others declared that liberty was the Negro's right. Before the meeting closed, John Woolman, John Scarborough, Daniel Stanton, and John Sykes were appointed a committee “to visit and treat with such Friends as kept slaves.”²¹ Thus the first important step towards the abolition of slavery was taken.

The committee lost no time in setting out on their mission. Such a stupendous undertaking, however, was fraught with obvious difficulties. In the first place, the system of

²⁰ Woolman reports his remarks in substance as follows: “In the difficulties attending us in this life nothing is more precious than the mind of truth inwardly manifested; and it is my earnest desire that in this weighty matter we may be so truly humbled as to be favored with a clear understanding of the mind of truth, and follow it; this would be of more advantage to the Society than any medium not in the clearness of Divine wisdom. The case is difficult to some who have slaves, but it should set aside all self-interest, and come to be weaned from the desire of getting estates, or even from holding them together, when truth requires the contrary, I believe way will so open that they will know how to steer through those difficulties.” “Journal,” pp. 91–92.

²¹ “Journal of John Woolman,” 93.

slavery had assumed such large proportions that it required a number of years to visit and treat with any appreciable number of slaveholders. Again, it was by no means easy to persuade slaveholders to give up a possession which meant so much to them in power and wealth. Finally, it was unfortunately true in the eighteenth century, as it is in the twentieth, that an argument of right and justice, based upon Christianity, did not have instantaneous effect upon professing Christians. But Woolman seemed divinely inspired to perform his mission. He travelled extensively and never hesitated to approach Friends on the subject of slavery.²² At the Yearly Meeting for 1759, he was gratified to learn that a recommendation had been made to Friends "to labor against buying and keeping slaves."²³

As a means of promoting his cause, Woolman published in 1762 the second part of his "Considerations on Keeping Negroes," a continuation of his appeal for the operation of the Golden Rule.²⁴ The overseers of the press offered to print the essay at the expense of the Yearly Meeting, but

²² Speaking of his mission, Woolman writes: "I have found an increasing concern on my mind to visit some active members in our Society who have slaves, and having no opportunity of the company of such as were named in the minutes of the Yearly Meeting, I went alone to the houses, and, in fear of the Lord, acquainted them with the exercise I was under; and thus, sometimes by a few words, I found myself discharged from a heavy burden." "Journal," p. 97.

²³ "Journal of John Woolman," 96.

²⁴ Following are two typical passages taken from the essay: "Through the force of long custom, it appears needful to speak in relation to color. Suppose a white child, born of parents of the meanest sort, who died and left him an infant, falls into the hands of a person, who endeavors to keep him a slave, some men would account him an unjust man in doing so, who yet appear easy while many black people, of honest lives, and good abilities, are enslaved, in a manner more shocking than the case here supposed. This is owing chiefly to the idea of slavery being connected with the black color, and liberty with the white. And where false ideas are twisted into our minds, it is with difficulty we get fairly disentangled." "Slave-Trade Tracts," Vol. 2.

Again, "The color of a man avails nothing, in the matters of right and equity. Consider color in relation to treaties; by such, disputes betwixt nations are sometimes settled. And should the Father of us all so dispose things, that treaties with black men should sometimes be necessary, how then would it appear amongst the princes and ambassadors, to insist upon the prerogative of the white color?" "Slave-Trade Tracts," Vol. 2.

Woolman did not accept the offer. He published the essay at his own expense.²⁵ Woolman gives the following reason for not accepting the overseers' offer: "This stock is the contribution of the members of our religious society in general, among whom are some who keep Negroes, and being inclined to continue them in slavery, are not likely to be satisfied with such books being spread among a people, especially at their own expense, many of whose slaves are taught to read, and, such receiving them as a gift, often conceal them. But as they who make a purchase generally buy that which they have a mind for, I believe it best to sell them expecting by that means they would more generally be read with attention."

The story of the rest of Woolman's life is but a repetition of his travels and labors in behalf of abolition. He travelled extensively, beheld the deplorable conditions attending slavery, and preached to Friends his only sermon, that "Whatsoever ye would that men should do unto you, do ye even so unto them." He did not live to see the slaves manumitted by all the slaveholding Friends, but he "was renewedly confirmed in mind that the Lord (whose tender mercies are over all his works, and whose ear is open to all the cries and groans of the oppressed) is graciously moving in the hearts of people to draw them off from the desire of wealth and to bring them into such an humble, lowly way of living that they may see their way clearly to repair to the standard of true righteousness, and may not only break the yoke of oppression, but may know Him to be their strength and support in times of outward affliction."²⁶

Woolman's career was fittingly brought to an end in England, the birthplace of the society for whose improvement he labored so faithfully. He landed at London in June, 1772, and went straightway to the Yearly Meeting.²⁷

²⁵ "Journal of John Woolman," p. 126.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 98.

²⁷ William J. Allinson, editor of the Friends' Review, tells the following story concerning Woolman's first appearance in England: The vessel reached London on the fifth day of the week, and John Woolman, knowing that the meeting was then in session, lost no time in reaching it. Coming in late and

He visited a number of meetings in neighboring towns. While he was attending a meeting of Friends at York, he was smitten with small-pox. He died of the malady, October 1, 1772. But his difficult duty had been performed, and his labor had not been in vain. His efforts had so greatly influenced the Society of Friends that the traffic in slaves had been almost abandoned during his life. Some, of course, continued the practice of holding slaves; but a protest against the practice was made at the Yearly Meeting two years after the death of Woolman, and in 1776 the subordinate meetings were instructed to "deny the right of membership to such as persisted in holding their fellow-men as property." Thus, within four years after the pious reformer's death, the Society of Friends embraced the doctrine of abolition and made slaveholding an offence against Christianity.

The life of John Woolman furnishes another example of a poor but courageous man, who, guided by the real teach-

unannounced, his peculiar dress and manner excited attention and apprehension that he was an itinerant enthusiast. He presented his certificate from Friends in America, but the dissatisfaction still remained, and some one remarked that perhaps the stranger Friend might feel that his dedication of himself to this apprehended service was accepted, without further labor, and that he might now feel free to return to his home. John Woolman sat silent for a space, seeking the unerring counsel of Divine Wisdom. He was profoundly affected by the unfavorable reception he met with, and his tears flowed freely. . . . He rose at last, and stated that he could not feel himself released from his prospect of labor in England. Yet he could not travel in the ministry without the unity of Friends; and while that was withheld he could not feel easy to be of any cost to them. He could not go back as had been suggested; but he was acquainted with a mechanical trade, and while the impediment to his service continued he hoped Friends would be kindly willing to employ him in such business as he was capable of, and that he might not be chargeable to any.

A deep silence prevailed over the assembly, many of whom were touched by the wise simplicity of the stranger's words and manner. After a season of waiting, John Woolman felt that words were given him to utter as a minister of Christ. The spirit of his Master bore witness to them in the hearts of his hearers. When he closed, the Friend who had advised against his further service rose up and humbly confessed his error, and avowed his full unity with the stranger. All doubt was removed; there was a general expression of unity and sympathy, and John Woolman, owned by his brethren, passed on to his work. Whittier, "Journal of John Woolman," 257-258.

ings of the Christian religion, rendered a great service to mankind. Living at a time when the defence of black men's rights was considered reprehensible, he fought against discouraging odds for the brotherhood of mankind. He was meek, persuasive, and confident. He was not a scholar, but "the greatest clerks be not the wisest men," says Chaucer. Like Bunyan, he was a student of the Holy Bible, and well understood its teachings. He realized that no power is durable, or any religion permanent, that is based on hypocrisy. He realized, further, that the grave question of men's rights must be interpreted in terms of the Christian religion. His fellow Friends, incited by selfish motives, had become unmindful of the basic elements of their religion. In their attempt to condone slavery and embrace the religion of brotherhood, they had made Christianity appear farcical. John Woolman's task, then, was not to propagate a new religion, but to make fashionable the Christian religion in which all professed a belief. He succeeded because he was allied to the right. He succeeded because he fought courageously against the wrong. He succeeded because he was a true disciple of the Christian religion. Although his laudable achievement is somewhat overlooked in these days, and his name does not command a conspicuous place on the pages of anthologies, the true lovers of freedom and the sincere exponents of the Christian religion will always remember with reverence the wonderful service of John Woolman, the pious Quaker of New Jersey.

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